

WHISPERING • SMITH

by FRANK H. SPEARMAN

ILLUSTRATIONS

BY ANDRE BOWLES

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CHAPTER I.

The Wrecking Boss.

News of the wreck at Smoky Creek reached Medicine Bend from Point of Rocks at five o'clock. Sinclair, in person, was overseeing the making up of his wrecking train, and the yard, usually quiet at that hour of the morning, was alive with the hurry of men and engines. In the trainmaster's room of the weather-beaten headquarters building nicknamed by railroad men "The Wickup," early comers—sleepy-faced, keen-eyed trainmen—lounged on the tables and in chairs discussing the reports from Point of Rocks, and among them crew-callers and messengers moved in and out. Two minutes after they had their orders and were pulling out of the upper yard, with right of way over everything to Point of Rocks.

The wreck had occurred just west of the creek. A fast east-bound freight train, double-headed, had left the track on the long curve around the hill, and when the wrecking train backed through Ten Shed cut the sun streamed over the heaps of jammed and twisted cars strung all the way from the point of the curve to the foot of Smoky hill. The crew of the train that lay in the ditch walked slowly up the track to where the wreckers had pulled up, and the freight conductor asked for Sinclair. Men rigging the derrick pointed to the hind car. The conductor, swinging up the caboose steps, made his way inside among the men that were passing out tools. The air within was bluish-thick with tobacco smoke, but through the haze the freightman saw facing him, in the far corner of the den-like interior, a man seated behind an old dining-car table, finishing his breakfast; one glimpse was enough to identify the dark beard of Sinclair, foreman of the bridges and boss of the wrecking gang.

Beside him stood a steaming coffee tank, and in his right hand he held an enormous tin cup that he was about to raise to his mouth when he saw the freight conductor. With a laugh, Sinclair threw up his left hand and beckoned him over. Then he shook his hair just a little, tossed back his head, opened an unusual mouth, drained the cup at a gulp, and cursing the freightman fraternally, exclaimed: "How many cars have you ditched this time?"

The trainman, a sober-faced fellow, answered, dryly: "All I had."

"Running too fast, eh?" glared Sinclair.

With the box cars piled 40 feet high on the track, the conductor was too old a hand to begin a controversy. "Our time's fast," was all he said.

Sinclair rose and exclaimed: "Come on!" And the two, leaving the car, started up the track. The wrecking boss paid no attention to his companion as they forged ahead, but where the train had hit the curve he scanned the track as he would a blue print. "They'll have your scalp for this," he declared, abruptly.

"I reckon they will."

"What's your name?"

"Stevens."

"Looks like all day for you, doesn't it? No matter; I guess I can help you out."

Where the merchandise cars lay, below the switch, the train crew knew that a tramp had been caught. At intervals they heard groans under the wreckage, which was piled high there. Sinclair stopped at the derrick, and the freight conductor went on to where his brakeman had enlisted two of Sinclair's giants to help get out the tramp. A brake beam had crushed the man's legs, and the pallor of his face showed that he was hurt internally, but he was conscious and moaned softly. The men had started to carry him to the way car when Sinclair came up, asked what they were doing, and ordered them back to the wreck. They hastily laid the tramp down. "But he wants water," protested a brakeman who was walking behind, carrying his arm in a sling.

"Water!" bawled Sinclair. "Have my men got nothing to do but carry a tramp to water? Get ahead there and help unload those refrigerators. He'll find water fast enough. Let the damned hobo crawl down to the creek after it."

The tramp was too far gone for resentment; he had fainted when they laid him down, and his half-glazed eyes, staring at the sky, gave no evidence that he heard anything.

The sun rose hot, for in the Red desert sky there is rarely a cloud. Sinclair took the little hill nearest the switch to bellow his orders from, running down among the men whenever necessary to help carry them out. Within 20 minutes, though apparently no impression had been made on the great heaps of wrecked and splintered equipment, Sinclair had the job in hand.

The freight conductor, Stevens, afraid of no man, had come up to speak to Sinclair, and Sinclair, with a smile, laid a cordial hand on his shoulders. "Stevens, it's all right. I'll get you out of this. Come here." He led the conductor down the track

where they had walked in the morning. He pointed to flange-marks on the ties. "See there—there's where the first wheels left the track, and they left on the inside of the curve; a thin flange under the first refrigerator broke. I've got the wheel itself back there for evidence. They can't talk fast running against that. Damn a private car line, anyway! Give me a cigar—haven't got any? Great guns, man, there's a case of Key Wests open up ahead; go fill your pockets and your grip. Don't be bashful; you've got friends on the division, if you are Irish, eh?"

"Sure, only I don't smoke," said Stevens, with diplomacy.

"Well, you drink, don't you? There's a barrel of brandy open at the switch."

The brandy cask stood up-ended near the water butt, and the men dipped out of both with cups. They were working now half naked at the wreck. The sun hung in a cloudless sky, the air was still, and along the right of way huge wrecking fires added to the scorching heat. Ten feet from the water butt lay a flattened mass of rags. Crusted in smoke and blood and dirt, crushed by a vise of beams and wheels out of human semblance, and left now an aimless, twitching thing, the tramp clutched at Stevens' foot as he passed. "Water!"

"Hello, old boy, how the devil did you get here?" exclaimed Stevens, retreating in alarm.

"Water!"

Stevens stepped to the butt and filled a cup. The tramp's eyes were closed. Stevens poured the water over his face; then he lifted the man's head and put a cupful to his lips.

"Is that hobo alive yet?" asked Sinclair, coming back smoking a cigar.

"What does he want now? Water? Don't waste any time on him."

"It's had luck refusing water," muttered Stevens, holding the cup.

"He'll be dead in a minute," growled Sinclair.

The sound of his voice roused the falling man to a fury. He opened his bloodshot eyes, and with the dregs of an ebbing vitality cursed Sinclair with a frenzy that made Stevens draw back. If Sinclair was startled he gave no sign. "Go to hell!" he exclaimed, harshly.

With a ghastly effort the man made his retort. He held up his blood-soaked fingers. "I'm going all right—I know that," he gasped, with a curse, "but I'll come back for you!"

Sinclair, unshaken, stood his ground. He repeated his imprecation more violently; but Stevens, swallowing, stole out of hearing. As he disappeared, a train whistled in the west.

CHAPTER II.

At Smoky Creek.

Karg, Sinclair's crew foreman, came running over to him from a pile of merchandise that had been set off the right of way on the wagon road for loot. "That's the superintendent's car coming, ain't it, Murray?" he cried, looking across the creek at the approaching train.

"What of it?" returned Sinclair.

"Why, we're just loading the team."

The incoming train, an engine with a way car, two flats, and the Bear Dance derrick, slowed up at one end of the wreck while Sinclair and his foreman talked. Three men could be seen getting out of the way car—McCloud, the superintendent, and Reed Young, the Scotch roadmaster, and Bill Dancin'. A gang of trackmen filed slowly out after them.

The leaders of the party made their way down the curve, and Sinclair, with Karg, met them at the point. McCloud asked questions about the wreck and the chances of getting the train clear, and while they talked Sinclair sent Karg to get the new derrick into action. Sinclair then asked McCloud to walk with him up the track to see where the cars had left the rail. The two men showed in contrast as they stepped along the ties. McCloud was not alone younger and below Sinclair's height; his broad Stetson hat flattened him somewhat. His movement was deliberate beside Sinclair's litheness, and his face, though burned by sun and wind, was boyish, while Sinclair's was strongly lined.

"Just a moment," suggested McCloud, mildly, as Sinclair hastened past the goods piled in the wagon road. "Whose team is that, Sinclair?" The road followed the right of way where they stood, and a four-horse team of heavy mules was pulling a loaded ranch wagon up the grade when McCloud spoke.

Sinclair answered cordially. "That's my team from over on the Frenchman. I picked them up at Denver. Nice mules, McCloud, ain't they? Give me mules every time for heavy work. If I had just a hundred more of 'em the company could have my job—what?"

"Yes. What's that stuff they are hauling?"

"That's a little stuff mashed up in the merchandise car; there's some tobacco there and a little wine, I guess. The cases are all smashed."



"Water!" bawled Sinclair, "Have My Men Got Nothing to Do But Carry Tramps to Water?"

"Let's look at it."

"Oh, there's nothing there that's any good, McCloud."

"Let's look at it."

As Bill Dancin' and Young walked behind the two men toward the wagon, Dancin' made extraordinary efforts to wink at the roadmaster. "That's a good story about the mules coming from Denver, ain't it?" he muttered. Young, unwilling to commit himself, stopped to light his pipe. When he and Dancin' joined Sinclair and McCloud the talk between the superintendent and the wrecking boss had become animated.

"I always do something for my men out of a wreck when I can; that's the way I got the work out of them," Sinclair was saying. "A little stuff like this," he added, nodding toward the wagon, "comes handy for presents, and the company couldn't get any salvage out of it, anyway. I get the value a dozen times over in quick work. Look there!" Sinclair pointed to where the naked men heaved and wrenched in the sun. "Where could you get white men to work like that if you don't jolly them along once in a while? What? You haven't been here long, McCloud," smiled Sinclair, laying a hand with heavy affection on the young man's shoulder. "Ask any man on the division who gets the work out of his men—who gets the wrecks cleaned up and the track cleared. Ain't that what you want?"

"Certainly, Sinclair; no man that ever saw you handle a wreck would undertake to do it better."

"Then what's all this fuss about?"

"We've been over all this matter before, as you know. The claim department won't stand for this looting; that's the whole story. Here are ten or twelve cases of champagne on your wagon—soiled a little, but worth a lot of money."

"That was a mistake loading that up; I admit it; it was Karg's carelessness."

"Here is one whole case of cigars and part of another," continued McCloud, climbing from one wheel to another of the wagon. "There is a thousand dollars in this load! I know you've got good men, Sinclair. If they are not getting paid as they should be, give them time and a half or double time, but put it in the pay checks. The freight loss and damage account increased 200 per cent. last year. No railroad company can keep that rate up and last, Sinclair."

"Hang the company! The claim agents are a pack of thieves," cried Sinclair. "Look here, McCloud, what's a pay check to a man that's sick, compared with a bottle of good wine?"

"When one of your men is sick and needs wine, let me know," returned McCloud; "I'll see that he gets it. Your men don't wear silk dresses, do they?" he asked, pointing to another case of goods under the driver's seat. "Have that stuff all hauled back and loaded into a box car on track."

"Not by a damned sight!" exclaimed Sinclair. He turned to his ranch driver, Barney Rebstock. "You haul that stuff where you were told to haul it, Barney." Then: "You and I may as well have an understanding right here," he said, as McCloud walked to the head of the mules.

"By all means, and I'll begin by countermanding that order right now. Take your load straight back to that car," directed McCloud, pointing up the track. Barney, a ranch hand with a cigarette face, looked surlily at McCloud.

Sinclair raised a finger at the boy.

"You drive straight ahead where I told you to drive. I don't propose to have my affairs interfered with by you or anybody else, McCloud. You and I can settle this thing ourselves," he added, walking straight toward the superintendent.

"Get away from those mules!" yelled Barney at the same moment, cracking his whip.

McCloud's dull eyes hardly lightened as he looked at the driver. "Don't swing your whip this way, my boy," he said, laying hold quietly of the near bridle.

"Drop that bridle!" roared Sinclair. "I'll drop your mules in their tracks if they move one foot forward. Dancin', unhook those traces," said McCloud, peremptorily. "Dump the wine out of that wagon box, Young. Then he turned to Sinclair and pointed to the wreck. "Get back to your work."

The sun marked the five men rooted for an instant on the hillside. Dancin' jumped at the traces, Reed Young clambered over the wheel, and Sinclair, livid, faced McCloud. With a bitter denunciation of interlopers, claim agents, and "fresh" railroad men generally, Sinclair swore he would not go back to work, and a case of wine crashing to the ground infuriated him. He turned on his heel and started for the wreck. "Call off the men!" he yelled to Karg at the derrick. The foreman passed the word. The derrickmen, dropping their hooks and chains in some surprise, moved out of the wreckage. The axmen and laborers gathered around the foreman and followed him toward Sinclair.

"Boys," cried Sinclair, "we've got a new superintendent, a college guy. You know what he are; the company has tried 'em before. They draw the salaries and we do the work. This one down here now is making his little kick about the few pickings we get out of our jobs. You can go back to your work or you can stand right here with me till we get our rights. What?"

A half a dozen men began talking at once. The derrickman from below, a hatchet-faced wiper, with the visor of a greasy cap cocked over his ear, stuck his head between the uprights and called out shrilly: "What's er matter, Murray?" and a few men laughed. Barney had deserted the mules. Dancin' and Young, with small regard for loss or damage, were emptying the wagon like deckhands, for in a fight such as now appeared imminent, possession of the goods even on the ground seemed vital to prestige. McCloud waited only long enough to assure the emptying of the wagon, and then followed Sinclair to where he had assembled his men. "Sinclair, put your men back to work."

"Not till we know just how we stand," Sinclair answered, insolently. He continued to speak, but McCloud turned to the men. "Boys, go back to your work. Your boss and I can settle our own differences. I'll see that you lose nothing by working hard."

"And you'll see we make nothing, won't you?" suggested Karg.

"I'll see that every man in the crew gets twice what is coming to him—all except you, Karg. I discharge you now. Sinclair, will you go back to work?"

"No!"

"Then take your time. Any men that want to go back to work may step over to the switch," added McCloud.

Not a man moved. Sinclair and Karg smiled at each other, and with no apparent embarrassment McCloud him-



self smiled. "I like to see men loyal to their bosses," he said, good-naturedly. "I wouldn't give much for a man that wouldn't stick to his boss if he thought him right. But a question has come up here, boys, that must be settled once for all. This wreck-looting on the mountain division is going to stop—right here—at this particular wreck. On that point there is no room for discussion. Now, any man that agrees with me on that matter may step over here and I'll discuss with him any other grievance. If what I say about looting is a grievance, it can't be discussed. Is there any man that wants to come over?" No man stirred.

"Sinclair, you've got good men," continued McCloud, unmoved. "You are leading them into pretty deep water. There's a chance yet for you to get them out of serious trouble if you think as much of them as they do of you. Will you advise them to go back to work—all except Karg?"

Sinclair glared in high humor. "Oh, I couldn't do that! I'm discharged!" he protested, bowing low.

"I don't want to be overhasty," returned McCloud. "This is a serious business, as you know better than they do, and there will never be as good a time to fix it up as now. There is a chance for you, I say, Sinclair, to take hold if you want to now."

"Why, I'll take hold if you'll take your nose out of my business and agree to keep it out."

"Is there any man here that wants to go back to work for the company?" continued McCloud, evenly. It was one man against 30; McCloud saw there was not the shadow of a chance to win the strikers over. "This lets all of you out, you understand, boys," he added; "and you can never work again for the company on this division if you don't take hold now."

"Boys," exclaimed Sinclair, better humored every moment, "I'll guarantee you work on this division when all the fresh superintendents are run out of the country, and I'll lay this matter before Bucks himself, and don't you forget it!"

"You will have a chilly job of it," interposed McCloud.

"So will you, my hearty, before you get trains running past here," retorted the wrecking boss. "Come on, boys."

The disaffected men drew off. The emptied wagon, its load scattered on the ground, stood deserted on the hillside, and the mules drooped in the heat. Bill Dancin', a giant and a dangerous one, stood lone guard over the loot, and Young had been called over by McCloud. "How many men have you got with you, Reed?"

"Eleven."

"How long will it take them to clean up this mess with what help we can run in this afternoon?"

Young studied the prospect before replying. "They're green at this sort of thing, of course; they might be fussing here till to-morrow noon, I'm afraid; perhaps till to-morrow night, Mr. McCloud."

"That won't do!" The two men stood for a moment in a study. "The merchandise is all unloaded, isn't it?" said McCloud, reflectively. "Get your men here and bring a water bucket with you."

McCloud walked down to the engine of the wrecking train and gave orders to the train and engine crews. The best of the refrigerator cars had been rerailed, and they were pulled to a safe distance from the wreck. Young brought the bucket, and McCloud pointed to the caskful of brandy. "Throw that brandy over the wreckage, Reed."

The roadmaster started. "Burn the whole thing up, eh?"

"Everything on the track."

"Bully! It's a shame to waste the liquor, but it's Sinclair's fault. Here, boys, scatter this stuff where it will catch good, and touch her off. Everything goes—the whole pile. Burn up everything; that's orders. If you can get a few rails here, now, I'll give you a track by sundown, Mr. McCloud, in spite of Sinclair and the devil."

The remains of many cars lay in heaps along the curve, and the trackmen like firebugs ran in and out of them. A tongue of flame leaped from the middle of a pile of stock cars. In five minutes the wreck was burning; in ten minutes the flames were crackling fiercely; then in another instant the wreck burst into a conflagration that rose hissing and seething a hundred feet straight up in the air.

From where they stood, Sinclair's men looked on. They were non-plussed, but their boss had not lost his nerve. He walked back to McCloud. "You're going to send us back to Medicine Bend with the car, I suppose?"

McCloud spoke amiably. "Not on your life. Take your personal stuff out of the car and tell your men to take theirs; then get off the train and off the right of way."

"Going to turn us loose on Red desert, are you?" asked Sinclair, steadily.

"You've turned yourselves loose."

"Wouldn't give a man a tie-pass, would you?"

"Come to my office in Medicine Bend and I'll talk to you about it," returned McCloud, impassively.

"Well, boys," roared Sinclair, going back to his followers, "we can't ride on this road now! But I want to tell you there's something to eat for every one of you over at my place on the Crawling Stone, and a place to sleep—and something to drink," he added, cursing McCloud once more.

CHAPTER III.

Dicksie.

The wreckers, drifting in the blaze of the sun across the broad alkali valley, saw the smoke of the wreck-fire behind them. No breath of wind stirred it. With the stillness of a signal column it rose, thin and black, and high in the air spread motionless, like a huge umbrella, above Smoky creek. Reed Young had gone with an engine to wire for re-enforcements, and McCloud, active among the trackmen until the conflagration spent itself, had retired to the shade of the hill.

Reclining against a rock with his legs crossed, he had clasped his hands behind his head and sat looking at the iron writhing in the dying heat of the fire. The sound of hoofs aroused him, and looking below he saw a horsewoman reining up near his men at the wreck. She rode an American horse, thin and rangy, and the experienced way in which she checked him drew him back almost to his haunches. But McCloud's eyes were fixed on the slender figure of the rider. Her boot flashed in the stirrup while she spoke to the nearest man, and her horse stretched his neck and nosed the brown alkali-grass that spread thinly along the road.

To McCloud she was something like an apparition. He sat spellbound until the trackman indiscreetly pointed him out, and the eyes of the visitor, turning his way, caught him with his hands on the rock in an attitude openly curious. She turned immediately away, but McCloud rose and started



She Was Something Like an Apparition.

down the hill. The horse's head was pulled up, and there were signs of departure. He quickened his steps. Once he saw, or thought he saw, the rider's head so turned that her eyes might have commanded one approaching from his quarter; yet he could catch no further glimpse of her face. A second surprise awaited him. Just as she seemed about to ride away, she dropped lightly from the horse to the ground, and he saw how confident in figure she was. As she began to try her saddle-girths, McCloud attempted a greeting. She could not ignore his hat, held rather high above his head as he approached, but she gave him the slightest nod in return—one that made no attempt to explain why she was there or where she had come from.

"Pardon me," ventured McCloud, "have you lost your way?"

He was immediately conscious that he had said the wrong thing. The expression of her eyes implied that it was foolish to suppose she was lost, but she only answered: "I saw the smoke and feared the bridge was on fire."

Something in her voice made him almost sorry he had intervened; if she stood in need of help of any sort it was not apparent, and her gaze was confusing.

"I presume Mr. Sinclair is here?" she said, presently.

"I am sorry to say he is not."

"He usually has charge of the wrecks I think. What a dreadful fire!" she murmured, looking down the track. "Was it a passenger wreck?" She turned abruptly on McCloud to ask the question. Her eyes were brown, too, he saw, and a doubt assailed him. Was she pretty?

"Only a freight wreck," he answered.

"I thought if there were passengers hurt I could send help from the ranch. Were you the conductor?"

"Fortunately not."

"And no one was hurt?"

"Only a tramp. We are burning the wreck to clear the track."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)